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ABSTRACT

Three types of intervention strategies are helping children make a successful transition into kindergarten: early intervention programs, school survival skill training, and delayed school entry. Early intervention programs are early childhood and preschool programs such as Head Start. The overall long-term effectiveness of such programs has generally been impressive; however, increased kindergarten readiness scores for participating children do not always transfer to the public schools, suggesting a discrepancy in classroom organization and teacher style between preschool and primary school. School survival-skill training involves direct instruction in specific skills immediately prior to the child's transition into school. Controversy over this approach has focused on whether preparation for kindergarten is an appropriate and necessary function of preschool programs. This controversy might be eased if some of the broader developmental tasks faced by children during early school transitions could be addressed, such as learning to view themselves as successful students, and formulating strategies for learning. Delay of school entry for children who appear at-risk for early difficulties often involves placing such children in "developmental" kindergarten or first-grade programs. The thrust of this movement is maturational rather than educational. Despite the increasing use of this strategy, a review of research into delayed school entry, placement in developmental programs, or retention following kindergarten or first grade indicates overwhelmingly that these practices are rarely helpful and sometimes harmful. Factors contributing to successful school transition include personal characteristics of the child, children's school performance, family and parent characteristics, and teacher characteristics. (HTH)

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A Review of Current Intervention Practices

by

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by

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Abstract

Entry into school marks an especially crucial transition with life-long implications for the individual's achievement and socio-emotional development. Three intervention strategies for helping children make a successful transition into school — early intervention programs, school survival skill training, and delayed school entry — are reviewed and their effectiveness evaluated.

Promoting Successful Transition into School: A Review of Current Intervention Practices

Transitions are an integral part of all human activity and an important impetus for developmental change (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). At the same time, transitions can be a source of risk to the developing child if the expectations and demands of the new environment prove to be overwhelming, or the accommodations required of the child exceed his or her ability to cope. For children who are already at risk, because of socio-economic disadvantage, physical disabilities, or developmental delays such as specific language impairment, transitions are particularly critical points in the life course (Rice & O'Brien, 1990).

The negotiation of change from one living or learning environment to another always involves new developmental tasks, many of which arise only secondarily to the explicit demands of the new setting. For example, transitions inevitably involve a re-evaluation of one's self image given a new context and a new set of comparisons. Despite their obvious importance to the adaptation of the child, considerations such as these are rarely included in studies of children's successful entry into new environments. In general, the importance of transitions to children's developmental progress has been recognized and studied only recently, perhaps because periods of rapid change are so much more difficult to analyze than periods of stability.

One especially crucial transition with life-long implications for the individual's achievement and socio-emotional development is the

entry into school (Alexander & Entwisle, 1988; Ladd & Price, 1987). Children who fail to adjust to the demands of school, either because they are unable to master basic skills such as reading or unable to accommodate to the behavioral expectations of the classroom, may set a pattern of failure that persists throughout their years in school and beyond. Because school performance is cumulative, difficulties in the early years of school are magnified in each succeeding year. And — although we all can point to individuals who were able to achieve an educational comeback after dismal years in elementary school — it is more usual for a child's educational trajectory to be established and remain relatively consistent by the end of the third grade year (Pallas, Entwisle, Alexander, & Cadigan, 1987).

For the typical child, the transition into kindergarten and then into the primary grades is uneventful and represents what Bronfenbrenner (1986) has termed a ***normative*** life transition. For a minority of children, the entry into school is unsuccessful, and the normative transition is disrupted. When a child fails unexpectedly, is placed in a special classroom, or is unable to negotiate the intricacies of written language, the child and family experience a ***non-normative*** transition. Because non-normative transitions are associated with high stress and emotional conflict, they affect the functioning of the family as well as the child and therefore influence future development both directly and indirectly.

In recognition of the importance of school entry in children's lives, several initiatives to help children adapt successfully to school have been pursued by educators. In this paper, three general approaches to enhancing success — early intervention, school survival skill training, and delay of school entry often involving placement in a "developmental" program — will be discussed briefly and the evidence for their effectiveness reviewed. Finally, some suggestions for researchers and educators will be distilled from the current literature.

Early Intervention

The past 30 years have seen an emphasis on early intervention programs, most notably the Head Start program, whose primary goals include preparing children for success in school. The overall effectiveness of such programs has generally been impressive (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Clement et al., 1984; Lazar & Darlington, 1982; Wasik, Ramey, Bryant, & Sparling, 1990); however, evaluations have been based primarily on long-term achievement and continued placement in regular versus special education classrooms. What is the evidence for the role of early intervention programs in making the initial entry into school more successful for children?

Few studies have directly addressed this issue. In an evaluation of the Brookline Early Intervention Program, Pierson (1983) reported observational data showing that participants had better social skills at the time of kindergarten entry, and that they were more involved in classroom activities than their agemates who had not experienced the program. Disturbingly, Pierson and colleagues also report that kindergarten teachers did not perceive the intervention-group children as more mature or more socially competent; instead, teachers' ratings of children appeared to be heavily influenced by such family background characteristics as income, education, and race.

The early intervention approach attempts to influence success in school by two avenues: providing intellectual stimulation that will enhance early cognitive development and encouraging social "pre-adaptation" to school by socializing children to peer-group settings, providing opportunities to rehearse school roles, and helping children deal with separation from parents. To determine whether either or both of these efforts actually helps children succeed in first grade, one group of investigators has examined the role of the *amount* of kindergarten experience on performance in first grade (Entwisle, Alexander, Cadigan, & Pallas, 1987). Children, especially blacks, with more kindergarten experience

performed better on academic tasks early in first grade, but this difference disappeared by the end of the year. No effects of kindergarten experience were found on children's social development or on their teachers' perceptions of their social maturity.

Evaluations of Head Start and other early intervention programs clearly indicate that participating children score higher on tests of kindergarten readiness and academic aptitude than non-intervention groups (Bronfenbrenner, 1974; National Head Start Association, 1990). It is also evident, however, that these gains are not always transferred into the public schools. Perhaps the discrepancy in classroom organization and teacher style between preschool and early intervention programs as compared with primary grades affects children's ability to accommodate to school.

For example, in most early childhood programs, spontaneous play, with its associated experimentation, exploration, problem-solving, and peer interaction, is the predominant mode of teaching and learning (Widerstrom, 1986). Primary school classrooms, including most kindergartens, have quite different goals (Figure 1). Children's involvement is replaced by teacher control, peer interaction is discouraged, and a specific amount of "material" must be covered on a given day, regardless of children's level of interest. Furthermore, the role of teachers in the two settings differs substantially (Figure 2), resulting in radically different experiences for children.

At the very least, it is ironic that in the 1990s, when such a large proportion of children are receiving preschool services of one kind or another, that the numbers considered "not ready" for school entry are increasing. At worst, it is highly discouraging to speculate that cognitive gains made by at-risk children in early intervention programs may be wiped out in less than a year by the demands for compliance, passivity, and order imposed by primary school settings.

Early childhood educators have recognized the need for more specific transition planning and have developed interventions geared primarily toward increasing communication among preschool and kindergarten

Figure 1. Goals of early childhood programs contrasted with goals of primary school classrooms.

Early Childhood	Primary School
Involvement of children	Control by teacher
High rates of peer-peer interaction	Low rates of peer-peer interaction
Acceptance of child contribution	Evaluation of child performance
Teaching follows child's interests	Teaching set by pre-established curriculum

Figure 2. Teachers' roles in early childhood compared with primary school classrooms.

Early Childhood	Primary School
Respond	Initiate
Listen to children	Talk to children
Follow children's lead	Direct children's behavior
Encourage child initiation	Encourage child compliance
Participate in activities with children	Organize activities for children

teachers as well as encouraging the involvement of parents in planning for children's transitions (Diamond, Spiegel-McGill, & Hanrahan, 1988; Fowler, 1982; Fowler, Chandler, Johnson, & Stella, 1988; Hains, Fowler, & Chandler, 1988). The national Head Start organization also implemented a program of transition grants in 1986 to examine methods for promoting successful transition into school (Hubbell et al., 1987). Again, most projects emphasized professional communication and such administrative arrangements as transfer of records rather than direct intervention with children across the period of transition. Several studies examining the administrative aspects of transition have documented differences in teacher expectations and setting demands that may present barriers to accommodation for some children (e.g., Hains, Fowler, Schwartz, Kottwitz, & Rosenkoetter, 1989). Out of these studies has come another approach to intervention: school survival skill training.

School Survival-Skill Training

This approach involves direct intervention focused on the training of specific skills immediately prior to the child's transition into school. Training in survival skills assumes that children's early school success is influenced by their ability to adapt their behavior to the daily expectations of the classroom teacher, particularly in functioning academically without a lot of teacher involvement (Sainato & Lyon, 1989). Thus, such activities as working independently at a desk or table, following verbal directions, and moving from one activity to another without disruption are typically considered school survival skills.

Controversy over this approach has focused on the issue of whether preparation for kindergarten is an appropriate and necessary function of preschool programs. Those who argue against survival skill training are concerned that it encourages each child program to be viewed as a "prep school" for the next level, rather than a learning environment in and of itself. Eventually, the child's interests, curiosity, and creative individuality are likely to be submerged earlier and earlier in favor of the kind of compliance and passivity valued by many primary teachers.

The alternative view held by those who use survival skill interventions is that a few minor alterations in children's behavior *in a few specific situations* are enough to alter teacher perceptions of social maturity and therefore avoid special placements. To an extent, survival skill training can be seen as an attempt to circumvent unrealistic or rigid demands common in kindergarten and first grade classrooms. Children are taught, directly but within a supportive and positive environment, to behave the way most kindergarten and primary school teachers like children to behave — to sit quietly in their seat, complete work without teacher involvement, and respond compliantly to teacher directives rather than initiating interactions with peers.

Some of the controversy surrounding survival skill training might be eased if some of the broader developmental tasks faced by children during early school transitions could be addressed by these interventions as well as specific skills. At the time they enter school, children must

- learn to view themselves as successful students,
- discover the norms of the school,
- learn the rules for interacting with both peers and teachers, and
- formulate strategies for learning (Entwisle & Hayduk, 1988).

Although survival skill training addresses the second and third of these tasks, it does not address the others. An intervention that included in its targets some of the social-emotional and learning strategy issues children must address would not only help children in the first few weeks of school but might sustain their early success over longer periods.

Helping children master the behavioral skills they need to succeed in the primary grades should also be viewed as a task for the

kindergarten and first-grade classroom, not solely for preschools. In fact, by assuming responsibility for getting children "ready" for school before they make the actual transition into kindergarten, early childhood educators have assumed a burden that naturally belongs to the schools, but which they have largely avoided in favor of the third intervention strategy to be discussed: delay of school entry.

Delay of School Entry: The Developmental Classroom

A trend increasingly popular among primary educators, school principals, and parents is the delay of school entry for children who appear to be at risk for early difficulties. This type of intervention often involves the placement of such children in "developmental" kindergarten or first grade programs, which effectively puts off the transition into school by a year.

Although programs labeled developmental or transitional differ in their content and organization, the overwhelming thrust of the movement toward later school entry is maturational, not educational. In most school districts, children in developmental classrooms do not receive individual intervention directed toward remediation of the specific deficits that led to the special placement; in fact, criteria for such placements are often vague and based on teacher or parent perceptions or child age rather than specific skill levels. As further evidence for the maturational basis of such programs, at the end of the year children are rarely tested to determine if they could rejoin their agemates but instead are automatically placed in a second year of the grade they just completed (Charlesworth, 1989).

Despite the wide adoption of school-entry delay policies across the country and the increasing numbers of children being placed in developmental classrooms—sometimes as many as a third of the entering children—few school districts routinely follow children's progress to evaluate their effectiveness. When school officials claim success, they usually cite lower rates of retention in later grades. The difficulty with the use of retention rates as an evaluation of developmental placements is that teachers are unwilling to recommend for retention a child who is already a year older than most of his or her classmates; thus, once a child has been in a developmental placement, he or she is automatically less likely to be retained later, regardless of actual classroom performance (Shepard & Smith, 1986).

A review of the research into delayed school entry, placement in developmental kindergarten or developmental first grade, or actual retention following kindergarten or first grade indicates overwhelmingly that these practices are rarely helpful and may be harmful to children (Bredekamp & Shepard, 1989; Ferguson, 1991; Gredler, 1984; May & Welch, 1984a, b; Shepard & Smith, 1986, 1987). Sometimes short-term gains, usually in reading achievement, are reported for children who are retained in grade or "preflunked" by placement in a developmental program, but these are almost never sustained nor are they adequate to compensate the children for the loss of a year and, even worse, the negative effect on children's self-esteem (Peterson, DeGracie, & Ayabe, 1987). Across a range of studies in different areas of the country, we find (Figure 3) that children who are most at risk are being further discouraged about school, children's fragile self-worth is being damaged, and, in the absence of specific interventions targeting the kinds of social behavior and classroom conduct difficulties that lead teachers to refer children to special classrooms, a delay of a year has no observable effect on what is termed children's social maturity (Gredler, 1984; May & Welch, 1984b; Peterson et al., 1987; Shepard & Smith, 1987). Given the ever-increasing popularity of these programs despite the weight of negative evidence, it may be worthwhile to examine this discrepancy more closely.

One interpretation is that teachers and parents do not fully understand the nature of transitions. Often, educators see develop-

Figure 3. Educators' stated goals for school-entry delay programs contrasted with the actual effects of such programs.

Stated Goal	Actual Effect
Allow low-achieving children to "catch up" to expectations of teachers	Discourage low-achieving children and develop a negative attitude about school
Enhance children's self-esteem by postponing demands	Lower children's self-esteem by emphasizing failure
Give children a chance to mature socially, fit better into classroom situation	No change in social behavior which represents enduring traits of individual

mental programs as a way to reduce unwanted heterogeneity in kindergarten and first grade classrooms. Unfortunately, data indicate that placing some children in developmental programs does not reduce the variability within the kindergarten or first-grade population (Shepard & Smith, 1986). There are always younger and older children, and a range of individual differences in ability, experience, and family situation. Furthermore, if educators were to study the characteristics of life transitions, they would find that behavioral variability is always highest during transitions (Alexander & Entwisle, 1988). Thus, heterogeneity is expected in the transition years of kindergarten and first grade and will be naturally reduced in later grades, regardless of who is placed in special K and One classrooms and who is not. Parents, too, may misunderstand the effect of transitions on their children. Many parents choose to delay their child's school entry in order to protect their child from stress. Because for most parents school entry is the first point at which their child's competence is judged and evaluated by "professionals," parents themselves may find the school-entry experience stressful. However, the idea that stress can be reduced by delaying school entry is not supported by research findings. It is true that transitions are stressful, but they also represent opportunities. Parents who try to protect their children from the normative transition of school entry only force the child to cope with the much more difficult and emotion-laden non-normative transition of *failed* school entry. Although everyone involved in recommending developmental placements may have good intentions, an analysis of life transitions indicates that this policy is not in the children's interests.

It is interesting that educators typically see the delay of a year as beneficial to children at risk, but view promotion of gifted children into higher grades than their agemates to be potentially harmful, particularly to social development. Yet many academically gifted children are also socially gifted (Janos & Robinson, 1985), and even choose older children as friends. This inconsistency, combined with a general unwillingness to evaluate either policy, may be doing a disservice to children at both ends of the academic spectrum.

Another troublesome aspect of school-entry delay policies is that some child characteristics appear to make them more likely than others to be selected for a developmental program (Walsh, Ellwein, Eads, & Miller, 1991). Children of poverty families, minorities, males, and children with late-year birthdays are far more likely than their numbers warrant to be placed in developmental programs. When these factors are taken together, a poor young boy from a minority family has an extremely high probability of a special placement. To the extent that these programs fail to serve the best interests of *any* children, these statistics indicate they have a strong potential to become discriminatory.

Conclusions and Recommendations

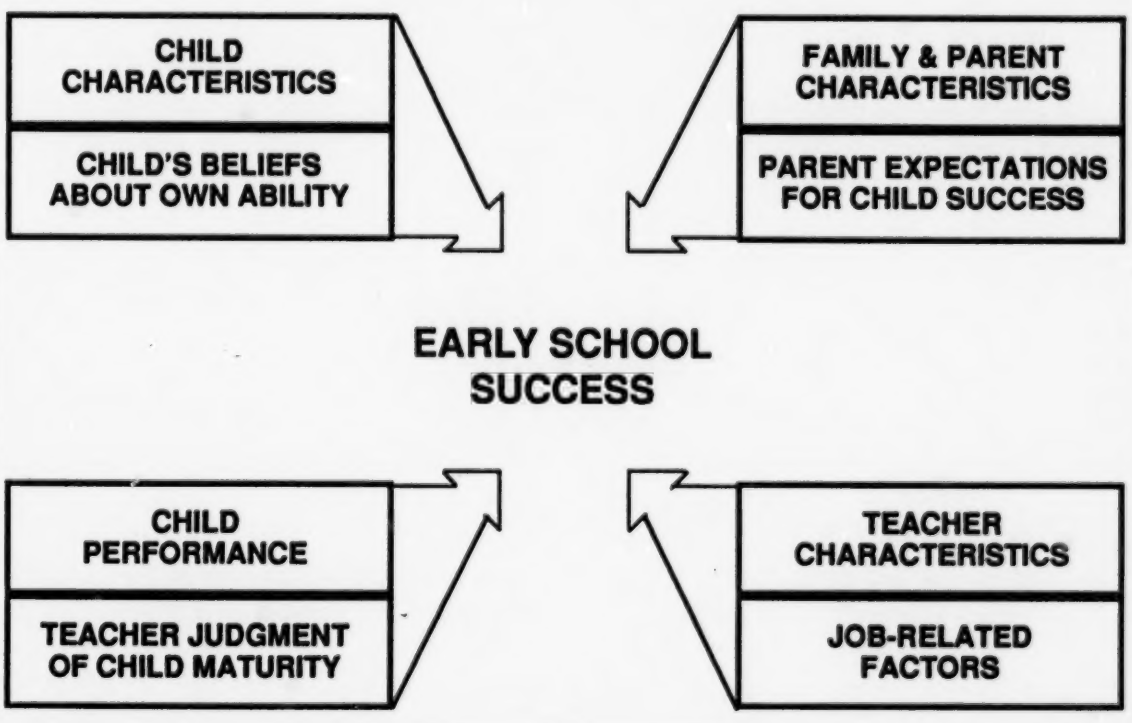
What then is the status of intervention at the point of transition into school? It may be helpful to examine the literature on factors contributing to early school success in order to evaluate current efforts to avoid failure.

The most thorough analyses of early success in school have been carried out in Baltimore by sociologists Doris Entwisle, Karl Alexander, and their colleagues (Alexander & Entwisle, 1988; Entwisle & Hayduk, 1982, 1988; Pallas et al., 1987). Known as the Beginning School Study, these investigations have analyzed four constructs independently of child cognitive ability; each is hypothesized to influence early school success. As shown in Figure 4, the constructs are:

- **personal characteristics of the child** such as age, sex, ethnic group membership, and popularity with peers, and also including children's own beliefs about their ability;
- **children's school performance**, including verbal test scores and classroom conduct as well as teacher judgments about children's maturity;
- **family and parent characteristics**, such as parental education and parents' expectations for children's success; and
- **teacher characteristics**, including such job-related factors as teacher assessment of the school climate and the amount of work-related conflict experienced by the teacher, as well as ethnic group, education, and marital status.

Although all of these factors contribute in some ways to children's successful adaptation to school, the strongest predictors are not the most obvious. In general, the child who is most likely to do well in first grade is the one whose teacher considers him or her to be socially mature, who considers him- or herself to be academically competent, and whose

Figure 4. Factors contributing to early school success.



first-grade teacher likes the school (Pallas et al., 1987). Across several different studies by the Beginning School Study group and others, social relationships with teachers and peers and self- and parental attributions for success are the most powerful predictors of a positive school transition (Alexander & Entwisle, 1988; Entwisle & Hayduk, 1988; Ladd & Price, 1987). In addition, teachers' background characteristics (race, SES, marital status) and attitudes toward children and toward their school have strong effects.

The three types of intervention reviewed in this paper can be tested against this model to determine whether they are likely to be effective in helping children succeed. Early intervention programs such as Head Start select participants primarily on the basis of family background characteristics, intervene into child characteristics and possibly child performance variables. Survival skill training selects children based on child performance characteristics and attempts to influence both child performance and teacher judgment. Delayed school entry is recommended for children who are viewed by teachers as immature and placement is frequently influenced by family background characteristics. Developmental programs vary considerably in nature, but typically assume that as the child matures over the year, his or her performance will improve.

None of these intervention approaches targets the belief systems of children or parents, and none attempts to influence the teacher or school directly. If children's own expectations for academic success, their parents' expectations for their children's success, and characteristics of the teacher and the school are the strongest predictors of a successful transition, then none of the current intervention strategies is aiming at the right targets.

All of our current intervention approaches put the burden for adaptation and accommodation on the *child*, whose performance is then evaluated for success or failure. The model of early school success strongly indicates that it is not the child alone who is responsible. Teachers must accept the responsibility of educating *every* child in the early years of school, regardless of the child's skill level, maturity, or family background. Several initiatives aimed at this goal have been tried and found successful, but are implemented only in isolated school districts around the country. These include ungraded primary classrooms; full-day kindergartens; the adoption of a less evaluative, more child-centered learning approach; and a commitment to view progress individually for each child rather than in competition with one another or with a national norm. Until our schools are willing to accommodate to children rather than making children accommodate to schools, our best intervention efforts will not effectively bridge the transition into school for all children.

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